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U.S. Will Offer New Arms Proposal in Bid To Bolster Reàgan Prior to Summit Talks

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan, moving to strengthen his hand before his summit meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, announced that the U.S. will make a new proposal today at the arms control talks in Geneva, Switzerland.

In a brief appearance in the White House press room yesterday, Mr. Reagan said the proposal calls for "very significant, balanced reductions" in nuclear arsenals. While refusing to give details, he said the proposal, the first new U.S. move since last spring, is characterized by "deep cuts, no first-strike advantage, defensive research because defense is safer than offense and no cheating."

Administration officials said the Reagan proposal would limit each side to 4,500 nuclear warheads, of which only 3,000 could be deployed on land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, the most menacing part of the strategic arsenal because of their accuracy, power and speed. The U.S. currently has nearly 11,000 nuclear warheads in its strategic arsenal, while Moscow has about 9,500. However, the superpowers have deployed their forces in sharply different ways. About 6,400 of the Soviet warheads are deployed on land-based missiles, while only 2,125 of the American warheads are on ICBMs; the rest are deployed on submarine-launched ballistic missiles and bombers.

The Reagan plan is designed to respond to an earlier Soviet call for a 50% reduction in strategic nuclear arsenals—those the superpowers aim at each other. In his first term Mr. Reagan proposed cutting strategic arsenals to 5,000, with 2,500 warheads on ICBMs. Officials said that the latest proposal wouldn't limit the U.S. development of new strategic defenses, which Mr. Reagan believes are the key to nuclear stability. Preventing the U.S. deployment of new strategic defenses is one of Moscow's primary goals in the arms control negotiations.

Mr. Reagan said he has sent a letter to Mr. Gorbachev about the proposal and has asked the Soviets to extend the current round of Geneva talks by a week to allow the U.S. to explain the proposal. The comprehensive plan addresses "all three areas of the negotiations"—strategic weapons, theater nuclear weapons in Europe and space-based defenses, Mr. Reagan said.

'Hopeful and Optimistic'

The new U.S. initiative shows that Mr. Reagan is striving to avoid being outflanked by the Soviets as the Nov. 19-20 summit approaches. In an interview with four Soviet journalists yesterday, Mr. Reagan said he was "hopeful and optimistic that maybe we can make some concrete achievements" at the summit.

The U.S. proposal follows an active Soviet diplomatic and public relations offensive designed to win support for Moscow's policies. U.S. analysts believe, for instance, that Moscow's apparent granting of permission for Yelena G. Bonner, the wife of Soviet dissident Andrei D. Sakharov, to go abroad for medical treatment is related to a broader campaign to win favorable media attention, especially in Europe.

In another initiative aimed at Europe and the U.S., Mr. Gorbachev generated big headlines by announcing a proposal to reduce nuclear arsenals by 50% prior to his visit to Paris last month.

Mr. Reagan has spent most of the pre-summit period trying to switch the spotlight to Soviet arms treaty violations and Moscow's involvement in Afghanistan and other areas. Washington's European allies have been urging Mr. Reagan to signal a willingness to negotiate as he heads for the summit, and the new proposal appears to be an effort to do that.

'Real Proposals'

Most analysts agree that it is too soon to tell whether the basis for an arms control agreement has yet taken shape. However, Arnold Horlick, a Rand Corp. Soviet affairs expert, says that "it isn't entirely a game of fluff and propaganda because real proposals are being made."

The Soviets, for example, have returned to the negotiating table after storming out in late 1983 to protest the deployment of U.S. medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe. Moscow had vowed it wouldn't return until the missiles were removed, although now it is proposing a freeze at current levels in these weapons. Moreover, the Soviet proposal for 50% reductions broadly conforms to President Reagan's insistence on massive cuts in both sides' nuclear arsenals; now, the experts in Geneva will have the opportunity to negotiate the differences.

Secretary of State George Shultz, sees this as an auspicious start. "There is more of an atmosphere of exchange of views on this—back and forth—than there has been

for a while." Mr. Shultz leaves tomorrow for Moscow, where he will hold his first meeting with Soviet leader Gorbachev to try to iron out details prior to the summit.

Although the most recent Soviet proposal "fell significantly short in several key areas," Mr. Reagan said he sees "certain positive seeds which we wish to nurture." He didn't explain what the "seeds" were, but the U.S. previously has proposed deep cuts in nuclear arsenals.

Few Signs of Interest

The Reagan administration has maintained the longest period of relative inactivity in arms control negotiations in recent U.S. history. Until lately, there have been few signs of serious interest in negotiations from Washington, and arms control experts have worried that, when the limits of the unratified SALT II treaty expire in December, both superpowers could begin to discard the restraints they imposed on themselves in the late 1970s.

A Central Intelligence Agency estimate released this summer predicted that, without arms control limitations, the Soviets have the capacity to expand their forces to at least 16,000 by the mid-1990s.

In his shorthand way of explaining his new proposal, President Reagan referred to deep cuts that wouldn't give either side a first-strike advantage. The cuts would have to apply proportionately to land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles on either side, weapons that are considered the most destabilizing because of their accuracy and speed—less than 30 minutes from launch to impact.

Because of the Soviet advantage in land-based warheads, the U.S. proposals tend to seek cuts in land-based ICBMs, while the Soviet proposals focus on other weapons.

Mr. Reagan's offer follows a recent Soviet proposal to cease work on a radar facility that the U.S. insists violates the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. American officials, in meetings with Europeans, have been citing the alleged violation to put Moscow on the defensive.